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## We Monks and Soldiers

Lutz Bassmann

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# WE MONKS & SOLDIERS

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# WE MONKS

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# **& SOLDIERS**

**LUTZ BASSMANN**

**TRANSLATED BY JORDAN STUMP**

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Set in Ehrhardt and Kyselak by Bob Reitz.

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# WE MONKS & SOLDIERS

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{ *Constant drumming. Silence during the text.* }



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AN EXORCISM

BESIDE THE

SEA



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# AN EXORCISM BESIDE THE SEA

IT WASN'T A long walk to the sea. I circled around the police station next door to the bus depot, then crossed two or three shop-lined streets and headed on toward the south. Five hundred meters further on, the sea came into view, dark green under the pale gray sky, dull green. It was as calm as a lake, and deserted, apart from two tankers vanishing over the horizon: not a ship, not a gull. I stopped and stood for a few minutes, looking at the water and breathing the sea air. I'd spent years locked away in a cell, with no landscapes to admire except in my dreams, and vast seascapes were something I'd missed. Then I set off eastward along the shoreline. The city didn't go on much further in this direction, and before long the last residential neighborhoods were behind me. The beachside avenue was now an empty narrow road. Sometimes it veered away from the water, sometimes it hugged the breaking waves. Here the houses were more scattered. Most had been built on the other side of the road, facing inland, but a few stood between the road and the water, some looking down from a rise, some washed by the spray, like fishermen's cabins. None was designed for the well-heeled vacationer. They were basic and plain. Rust caked the metal roofs, the walls were going black at the base, salt or rot eating away at the planks. Most seemed to have sat empty for years. Here and there I saw laundry drying on a line, often with a doghouse nearby; inside, one or two dogs raised their heads to inspect the intruder and immediately went back to

sleep, totally passive, never bothering to bark. No human being in sight. The road was drivable, in places still paved and unpocked, but there wasn't a car to be seen, probably because it was only a service road, half abandoned, leading nowhere. The house I was supposed to exorcise was the last in the row. After that it was all open country, kilometer after kilometer, flat or very slightly rolling, mostly yellow and wan, covered with marram, anonymous grasses, little flowerless bushes.

I reached the house in midafternoon, after a good hour's walk. I'd managed not to get rained on, but the sky had been darkening all the while. On my right, the sea had changed color too. I admired it a little longer, then turned my thoughts to the task I'd been assigned. They'd assured me nothing would stand in my way, the yard would be hidden behind a thick privet hedge, I could get down to work without anyone coming along asking questions. I saw a steel door set into the privet. I pushed it open and found myself facing a two-story wooden villa, its walls still sound, even if their honey-colored lacquer had gone brown over the years. A house without character, but bigger and not as run-down as the surrounding shacks. The first floor was a little above ground level, leaving room for a porch with a two-or-three square meter terrace. On the right, a tiny shed nestled against the hedge, one side of the roof extending out over an old car seat. On the left, a swing hung from a wooden trestle. Behind it lay the sea. No one had tended the yard for some time, and now it had been taken over by the kind of ugly, slovenly weeds you find on the coast, near the dunes, in soils made salty by the spray. Samphire, creeping restharrow, thick-leaved sea-cabbages and sea-beets, spurge and sea-kale, if the botany manuals are to be believed. Amid that bleak vegetation stood the house, uninteresting and undistinguished. It would all have seemed perfectly banal if not for the unexpected strings of Tibetan flags. Now I knew I'd found the house I was looking for. They'd given me a detailed description: last one on the coast road, a privet hedge, two stories, three or four steps up to the door, a little porch in front. There was no mention of flags, but that only

confirmed this was the place. Between the little columns supporting the porch roof, over and across the front steps, someone had strung garlands of Tibetan flags stamped with religious images, benevolent animals, prayers.

Here someone had been afraid.

A terror up from the abyss, a terror beyond measure.

Here someone had counted on superstition to restore the broken order of the world, to ward off forces of a horrifically foreign sort. To ward them off as best they could. Some twenty pennants and ribbons—yellow, blue, and red, in three strands—hindered access to the door and even the porch, symbolically barring the way to malign spirits. I counted twenty-one, generally a propitious number. No way in or out but by stepping over them, or ducking under. The wind was calm, and the fabric hung perfectly still, slightly faded. I undid the knots and restrung the magic festoons, draping them over the porch railing or down the banister. Now the way was clear. The flags had lost all supernatural efficacy, but they'd stay with the house, adorning the façade.

We monks and soldiers have no culture of magic. Not of this sort, clearly marked by shamanism, nor of any other. We place no faith in rituals involving artifacts, bits of cloth, bizarre or ridiculous gesticulations. We entrust our fate to far surer powers, powers lodged within us, formidable powers that practical studies have enabled us to cultivate and control. That said, indulgence for others' beliefs is in no way forbidden. I myself have always admired the aesthetics of those windhorses the Tibetans might still today suspend around their temples and sacred sites, assuming Tibet and its people have survived, assuming they haven't all sunk into oblivion, like so many peoples and nations, like so many of us. Those pieces of cloth don't really move me, but I like seeing them there. Their bright, open-hearted colors summon up memories of my childhood. They remind me of my travels.

I stepped back five or six paces, and even paused for a moment, as if to appraise my decorative handiwork. Then I circled around the house.

The spreading weeds had blurred the distinction between pathways and lawns that once gave the yard a respectably tidy appearance. Stiff or elastic, flexing and tangled, the stems reached up to my knees. I kicked or trampled thick, fleshy leaves as I walked, most often blindly. Advancing through this jungle, you felt none of the exaltation that comes with treading an inviolate steppe, for example, or a prairie. There was no sense of an epic encounter with nature. Only a noisy slog through an unkempt yard, and nothing more.

I passed by the shed. The car seat gave off an overpowering odor of mildew. I chose not to linger and pressed on toward the sea.

The house had broad windows in back. From upstairs the view of the shore must have been magnificent, but the ground floor offered no expanse of glass through which to marvel at that sight, and no door opening onto the lawn overlooking the beach. It was, and in this it resembled all the other structures scattered along the roadside, a house conceived without concern for architectural opulence. You might for example have pictured a terrace in back, an agreeable spot for seaside dining or reading, but no. No garden furniture occupied that flat lawn, and if someone had one day thought to grace it with a table and chairs, they'd all long since been carted off. A flight of concrete stairs led down to the shore in fifteen geometrically dubious steps. The water scarcely stirred on the black shingle beach. The waves broke without a crash, only foaming a little. It was a very tranquil spot. Not far from the water's edge, a dark line of debris and mangled seaweed showed the magnitude of the tides to be negligible.

I went down the stairs and stood on the stones for a moment, facing the emptiness. The air smelled of salt, of the seaside, but the scent wasn't strong. Reflecting the rain-gorged skies, the water was now perfectly gray. No ship could be seen on that vastness. I looked at the foam trickling over the stones, I listened to the hypnotic murmur of the sea. Nowhere did I see any sign of human activity. Two retaining walls stood to my east and west, protecting the yard from erosion. Extending out into the water, they made of

the beach a sort of small, manmade cove, where the waves' agitation, already slight, grew fainter still.

Behind my back, invisible from the beach, the house was waiting.

It's waiting, I thought. Time to go.

I climbed the stairs and resumed my tour of the yard. Now I was walking alongside the western wall. I brushed past the swing and its trestle and found myself back before the Tibetan flags.

Now I was facing the front door, once again.

I decided to go in.

I say "I," but it occurs to me I haven't introduced myself yet. Let's call me Schwahn. Names and nicknames make useful labels, but they don't tell you much. There's more or less nothing behind them. I could have chosen another, something more expressive, but this one will do here, no matter how little it means. So let's call me Schwahn. Physically there's not much to say about me, I don't look like anything in particular: like you, I'm contained by a skin, and at the top there's a face. Which means I could go unnoticed more or less anywhere. My face is, I think, the face of a solitary man, already wrinkled, already worn, already, for several years now, close to death, which is normal here after your fortieth year. Now and then people tell me I'm not as thin as I once was, back when I was first recruited. "Schwahn's putting on weight," you hear them say. "He'll look like a blimp by the time it's all over." That's the one detail that might, if need be, distinguish me amid a group of monks, prisoners, or soldiers, although others have the same failing, it's true, the same tendency to take leave of their slenderness. But anyway. That day I was dressed all in white, wearing a ceremonial hat with a crown of almost transparent mesh. In my right hand I held an umbrella, and a plain canvas bag was slung over my left shoulder, slapping my thigh. It would do to picture me like that, like an ordinary guy in white clothes, with a bag over one shoulder and a certain corpulence.

No sense of urgency pressed me to act. I was supposed to exorcise this house, but they'd left the method and timing up to me. I had carte blanche. I could have stood there for a long time to



come, contemplating that flag-draped porch, that sturdy door, that wretchedly luxuriant yard, waiting for who knows what. I could have gone on delaying the start of the intervention itself, waiting fifteen more minutes, then fifteen more. But what good would that do?

What good would that do? I thought.

The sooner the better, I thought. Now's the time.

I climbed the four steps and put my hand on the gilded doorknob. The door wasn't locked. It opened immediately, with no creaking.

Inside, the house was pleasantly sunlit, the shutters still open. Two enormous gray surfaces were visible through the sheer curtains and windowpanes: the slate-colored sky, the lighter tones of the sea. That was what immediately struck you, that luminous grayness, as if stretching off to infinity. The interior itself was not so poetic. The door opened straight into the living room. The floor was laid in light wood. I looked around. No furniture beyond the essentials, just a table on a coconut fiber rug, four chairs, some cushions, two chests. The white walls were decorated without style: an armful of dried flowers, two reproductions of Impressionist paintings, some cheap ceramics, a clock paralyzed at 10:18. It was like walking into a vacation house, the kind you rent by the week. The rest of the ground floor was much the same, the kitchen, the bathroom, a bedroom. The bedroom was spartan: a low chest of drawers, two chairs, a bare mattress on a metal frame. The owners had given the place a good cleaning before they cleared out. Everything was in order, in spite of the thin coating of dust. Nothing out of place. A fresh pair of sheets and some bath towels lay ready to use in the chest.

After that preliminary look around, I went down to explore the basement. A bare cement space, empty, undivided, reigned over by a new furnace and a water heater. Pipes ran diagonally along the walls, a broom and a snow shovel were leaning on a metal shelf by the furnace. The shelf held an assortment of cleaning products and a six-roll pack of toilet paper. Further on was a faucet, with a little jerrican underneath. That was all. The light came from basement windows set along the sides of the house. If you raised your head

and looked out, you saw dark brown dirt and the exuberant tangle of plants. The panes were spattered with mud.

I left the cellar, closed the door, and stood for a moment in the living room, at the foot of the stairway. A drab yellow rug lay before the first step. I liked the tranquility of that house, its plainness, its silence. I stood where I was, not moving except to turn my head toward one window or another, gazing out on the landscape from inside. On my left I saw the front yard, with the wall of privet beyond, and on my right the little patch of land between the house and the beach. Over the hedge and the spurge and sea-cabbage I could see the magnificent grays of the clouds and the sea.

Two minutes went by, maybe three.

Then my thoughts turned to a strange thing I'd just spotted on the stairway in front of me. The varnish on the steps was almost a centimeter thick. That excess of glaze flowed on well past the stairway, it coated the walls, coated the ceiling, coated everything.

I don't like that, I thought. That incomprehensible varnish, that deposit. That deposit from somewhere not of our world.

It was as if, by a transparent displacement, those surfaces had been unnaturally removed from the gaze, distanced from the real. Under the glaze they were at once present and inaccessible.

I warily climbed the steps to the upper floor, slowing down a little before I came to the top. Apart from that anomaly, that strange coating, everything looked normal. I pressed on.

Upstairs, the floorboards creaked under my weight. I found myself in a hallway with several doors. I pushed them open one by one. I took two or three paces into each room, stopped, had a look around, then turned back toward the hall. A bathroom, a bedroom, a storage room with an ironing board and a laundry basket, a stack of roughly folded dishtowels inside. A shampoo bottle and a little bar of soap sat on the rim of the bathtub, but apart from that it was all empty. Here too, the shutters stood open. There was plenty of light on the upper floor.

The varnish vitrified everything from floor to ceiling, including the few objects to be found in the rooms, the laundry, for example,

or the bathroom curtains, the shampoo bottle. It was as if some manner of mucus had been carefully applied to this space, and then left to harden.

I don't know what this means, I said to myself. What forces have been at work here, what beings. But one thing is clear: these things once were human possessions, and now they're not. Something had licked this floor over to take them away.

All the doors could be opened but the one to the middle bedroom, the biggest room on the floor, with two windows overlooking the sea. It hadn't been locked from inside, but there was no way to get in. I turned the knob and pushed on the door. The panel pivoted ten centimeters on its hinges, then came to an immovable halt. The resistance was absolute: some sort of obstacle seemed to be lying on the floor, something very heavy, solid, and dense. No way to slip an arm between the door and the jamb. No point even thinking of sticking my head in for a look.

I don't like that, I thought.

I'll bet whatever's lying behind this door has something to do with that varnish, that distancing from the human. It might well be the source of the sinister glaze spread over this whole upper level, I thought.

All I could see was a thin, vertical sliver of wallpaper, very plain, printed with forget-me-nots, and one corner of a black felt blanket draped over the floor. There was nothing remarkable about the blanket, but no transparent glaze had coated and immobilized it forever. "Let me in," I said softly, as if to myself. "You're lying on the floor, you're wrapped in a big square of felt, and under the felt is your body. Little matter what you look like today. Your body is of no importance. Move it, move the body you now inhabit. You're lost, you have no business here, I'm going to help you find your way back, back to others like you. They're worried not to have seen you come home."

I waited a few seconds.

"Let me in," I continued. "I'm going to give you a name, and then help you find the way out of here."

No answer.

“Imagine you remember me,” I said. “Imagine my voice is familiar. Try.”

I pushed on the door several times, with my hip and my shoulder. Inside, the wood encountered a woolly skin, or maybe the blanket whose corner I’d glimpsed. The door moved one or two millimeters more, then stopped short. Whatever that obstacle’s nature, it must have stood a half-meter high, judging by its inertia. It was a ponderous mass, impossible to move.

“Little matter if you’re happy or unhappy where you are,” I said in a toneless voice. “This place can no longer house you. You’re sleeping. I’m going to wake you, then I’ll guide you toward sleeps where you have a place. The house you now occupy was not meant for your presence. You’ve lost your way here. It’s time you were leaving. I’m going to show you the way.”

I waited a few minutes for some sort of reaction. Nothing came. A faint scent of eau de toilette drifted out of the room. I told myself not to go rummaging through my memories in search of its name or its brand. I’d known at least one woman who wore that perfume. It wasn’t unthinkable to associate her with whatever was lying on the other side of the door. I forced myself not to remember that woman. There was no connection. This was no time to be thinking of her, and no place. But the scent was still there, fresh and woody.

“I’m going to help you,” I said. “You haven’t been sapped of your strength, no hostile force has enfeebled you, you can move, you can leave. You’re wrapped in a black felt blanket, but nothing is truly imprisoning you. Your body is under that blanket. You’re inside that body, and you’re free. You have only to wake up in that body and move. You can leave if you’ll go to the trouble.”

I gave up pushing on the bedroom door.

I took a step back.

Outside, at almost the same instant, it started to rain. Now it was pouring. The rain hammered the roof, the house was silent no more, there were hundreds of drops, thousands, pounding all together, accompanied by melodious trickles and rushing cascades.

I went downstairs, crossed straight through the living room, and opened the front door. Not a breath of wind outside. The rain was falling straight down, spattering off the broad leaves of the plants in the front, pummeling the vinyl tiles on the porch roof. I stood facing the road, hearing no crash of waves on the beach behind the house. The air smelled of autumn, of rotting plants. The prayer flags on the banister would soon be soaked through. I opened my umbrella and ventured into the yard. I was well protected. The temperature was relatively mild. Motionless, calf-deep in tussocks of maritime euphorbia, I looked at the hedges, the trestle, the gas and electricity meters, and, beyond, what could be seen of the road and the scrubland. A puddle was forming in the road. No car had been by here for hours. Further on, the damp scrub dissolved into the mist. The few small hills, the clumps of trees, and the rain hid the handful of houses nearby.

I turned around and started to walk, taking my time. I skirted the western side of the house and went on past the shed with the moldering car seat. I headed toward the sea. I stopped on the patch of grass overlooking the cove. The rain blurred the horizon to the point of rendering its existence unlikely. Closer by, the water was peppered by falling drops, the surface half-flattened. On the pebbles, now very dark, the waves sprawled and receded, almost without sound or foam.

I stood there, thinking of nothing. I was frozen in place. What I could see of the shore and the water was in no way grandiose, but I drank it in all the same. I thought it was offering me strength, strength and serenity. Then I turned around to face the back of the house. I could clearly make out the windows of the big second-floor bedroom, the one I couldn't get into. Behind the glass I saw sheer curtains of unbleached tulle. They were hiding whatever was inside the room.

“You can hear me,” I said.

I was speaking as you might to someone standing close by your side. I didn't try to make myself heard over the pounding rain. I spoke in a neutral voice, without drama.

“Drowning or not, cheerful or not, you can hear me,” I said. “Through the hammering rain, you can hear me. I know you’re up there, lying there in that house, on the second floor of that house. Turn your attention outside and you’ll hear the rain beating the plants. That sound is not hostile to you. You can also hear the words coming to you from my mouth. Listen to me. This voice isn’t hostile to you either.”

I stepped closer and started speaking again, sticking to the same tone. I looked up at the bedroom, the windows. Rain was collecting on the edge of my umbrella and pouring down like a waterfall at my feet, spattering. I made no attempt to raise my voice, and perhaps, in the end, the sounds I produced were nothing more than a murmur.

“You’re lying on the floor,” I said. “You’re dozing, not dead. You’re lying motionless under the felt. You smell nice, you’ve kept your old perfume from before. But you came to this place by mistake, and now you don’t know how to leave. I’m going to help you out of this place that can shelter you no longer. I’ll help you out of that bedroom and back to the places that suit you.”

I waited.

The sky was deep gray. The rain made a tremendous roar all around me, in the grass, on the canvas over my head. Inland as out to sea, the distance had taken on a dusk-like appearance. It left you with an impression of fading daylight.

“I come toward you with no trace of aggression,” I said. “I’m going to come toward you, but not come too close, so you’ll have time to see me, to get used to me, to understand you must move, to understand you must wake up and get out of this place.”

I started around the house again. The circle described by my steps encompassed the grassy patch over the cove, the swing, the yard between the façade and the road, the concrete box housing the water, gas, and electricity meters, the shed with its foul-smelling car seat. I never got too close to the house, I gave it a wide berth when possible. There was no path to follow, everything was overgrown, I had no choice but to tromp through the fleshy, misshapen greenery

that flourished in the yard. The stems sprang back up the instant I stepped off them, they shot up behind me. The leaves brushed my calves, the tufts shook off their water. After a moment my pant legs and the hem of my gown were heavy and wet.

I walked two circles, then a third.

I was back in the spot where I'd last spoken up. I stopped. I was facing the second-floor bedroom again, with the sea behind my back. The water pelted the fabric over my head. The sky was dark. I didn't have a full view of the countryside, and the drops dripping off my umbrella got in my way, but I could still keep an eye on the second-floor windows. The big bedroom's tulle curtains hadn't moved. Nothing had changed. If you'll grant that the rain was falling with a monotony that excluded it from the realm of noteworthy sounds, then silence reigned, the calm was complete.

Speaking once again, I now broke that silence.

"Get up, now," I said. "Roll onto your side. Your form may or may not be clearly defined, but you certainly have a side. Throw off the piece of felt you have over you. It's time you woke up, time you got up. Get up. You've lost your way here, now you have to go. You have within you the force to stand up and leave. If it's a name you're missing, I'll give you a name, and then you can go."

Nothing was happening in the bedroom. No one appeared at the window, not a sound from inside.

"I'll give you my name, if you like," I suggested. "I know you can hear me. I can help you by giving you my name."

Between sentences the silence returned, the silent roar of the rain, the irregular lapping of the waves at my heels.

For a moment I thought of heading back into the house, of climbing the stairs and posting myself at the door and resuming my remonstrations and reproaches, louder than before. But that would mean setting foot once again on the varnish smeared over the real, and I found that an off-putting prospect. Then I remembered the puff of eau de toilette when I tried to open the door. Ever since that moment, I'd been doing my best not to go rummaging through my memories, not to link the exorcism in progress with

my own personal history. A woman surfaced in my thoughts. I had to leave her out of all this. She used that same perfume, bright and woody, or one like it. I'd been in love with her once. She'd fallen out with the higher-ups over a tactical question, but she'd never betrayed me. Nadiejda, I thought. I forced myself to stop thinking of her. This mission had nothing to do with us.

"Listen to me," I said, then fell silent.

I stood still for a minute, then went back to my circular stroll.

The vegetation bore no trace of my previous passage. The plants were resilient, I'd scarcely torn them or crushed them at all. In any case, they were now standing straight again. Of course, a trapper would have been able to read my trail like an open book, but I myself had been given no such training, and hunting is not among my pursuits. I marched back into the tangle of climbing and creeping plants that stretched out before me, leathery and pliable, like virgin greenery. The soil under the foliage wasn't yet clinging to my shoes, but it felt softer now. I caught only a short, oblique glimpse of it now and again, even with my eyes fixed on the ground before me, trying to note every detail. Among other things, they'd warned me never to let down my guard, to be constantly checking that I hadn't found my way into a dream. "If at any time you suspect you may be dreaming, keep your eyes fixed firmly on the ground," they'd instructed me. "Don't look into the distance, just look in front of your feet, cling to the reality of the ground. Only the ground always stays real. Look where you're putting your feet. That will give you at least some control over your acts, even if the dream you've stumbled into is a stranger's. Don't lose touch with the ground, hold on to the ground."

"Listen to me," I said. "Don't let down your guard. Don't look into the distance."

I went on circling the house for at least fifteen more minutes. A squeaking joint in my umbrella added a sharp punctuation to the rain's constant drumming and my rustling footsteps. I did my best to make sure I wasn't dreaming, I clung to the reality of the ground at all times, I kept my eyes glued to a spot just in front



of my feet. Whenever I came full circle I looked up toward the big bedroom windows, but I never stopped walking. I talked and talked, but my voice was less firm than before. For the most part, I murmured or mumbled whatever came into my head, solemn reprimands addressed I was no longer quite sure to whom, or to what end.

“Nothing around you opposes you,” I was saying. “But you have to leave. This earth is no place for you to linger, it wasn’t made as a place for you to sleep.”

I murmured those words and kept walking, with no clear path ahead of me through the coarse vegetation.

I’d stopped counting the circles I walked.

Sometimes I wondered if I’d let down my guard, sometimes I thought I was walking in no particular direction, following my nose under a gray cascade that erased any real countryside and limited my view to streaking vertical lines. I felt like I was drifting far from the grounds of the house I’d been sent out to exorcise. I’d been trained for this mission, it was the sole reason for my presence here, and now it was dissolving in the rain.

“Turn your attention outside and you’ll hear the rain beating the plants,” I said. “That sound is not hostile to you. This voice is not hostile to you either.”

Suddenly I felt my reasoning faculties draining away, leaving me benumbed in an endless, aimless promenade. I vaguely knew I had a task to perform, but I was incapable of choosing a method and sticking to it. Sentences sluggishly surfaced in my head, sentences linked to the expulsion I was expected to carry out here, but they’d lost all their force, and I felt a wavering as they reemerged into my consciousness. Now they were coming out in a low mutter. I had a hard time understanding them.

“Schwahn,” I mumbled. “You don’t know if you’re dreaming or not, you’re not sure what earth you’ve got under your feet. You’re prowling around this house, you’re trudging along like a sleepwalker. You don’t know how to inspire obedience in whatever’s inside that bedroom, just a few meters away. I can help you. Listen

to me. Move. Look at that house instead of studying the plants underfoot. You've been walking around here for hours with no plan, and you've accomplished nothing. You have to go all the way into the dream if you want to do what you came here for."

Night had fallen.

I stood motionless, facing the sea. The cove's forms lay concealed in the pouring rain. I couldn't see far, the little waves seemed to have been extinguished, the stones on the shore had taken on their nocturnal coal-like appearance. The sea's surface must have been dimpled with ten thousand craters, but everything was at the same time very simple and very unclear, like the watercolor of a painter with abstractionist tendencies. I stood on one side of that picture, a white figure with an umbrella, in the pose of a Taoist sage, which I was not. I turned around and, in spite of the darkness, saw the perfectly distinct mass of the villa, its upper floor, its windows revealing no sign of activity, its uninteresting façade, its roof, its torrential gutters.

"You have to go all the way into that dream," I said. "You came here to expel and destroy. Little matter if that is or is not what they call an exorcism. The circles you're walking around this house serve no purpose. Speaking serves no purpose. You have to act. Don't just stand there in a dream where you have no place. Move. Do what you must so this villa will no longer house what has taken up lodging inside."

I untied the cord on my canvas bag. So far, I'd touched none of the objects I'd brought with me.

"Schwahn," I said. "You've had a fairly thorough course of training as a monk, but you're also a soldier, and in that realm you have nothing to learn from anyone. This exorcism has produced no results. Spirituality has its limitations, you're experienced enough to know that. Time to try a more military approach."

The house stood before me, five or six meters away.

I closed the umbrella that had sheltered me up to then. I shook it off and set it down on the grass by my side. The rain immediately enveloped me. It immediately penetrated my clothes. It was abundant, it was heavy, but it wasn't cold.

“This rain won’t stop you,” I murmured. “Rain doesn’t stop soldiers from doing their job.”

I took a grenade from my shoulder bag, pulled the pin, and tossed it toward the ground-floor windows. It was tailor-made for an operation like this. The glass broke, I heard the projectile land on the floor and roll. Without stepping back and without wasting a moment, I threw a second grenade toward the upper level, toward the big bedroom window, then crouched down. At the same instant, a powerful explosion erupted from the ground floor, accompanied by a white flash. Black smoke poured from the windows, some of them blown wide open by the blast, glass and splinters flying in every direction. I hunched my shoulders. Debris pelted the plants all around me. The second explosion came a moment later, not as powerful as the first. I let the wave of dust and chemical odors pass by, then I looked up. The devastation on the upper floor was considerable. All the windows had shattered. The sills were demolished, the glass now existed only in the form of glistening fangs, the curtains hung loose outside the house in black shreds. I stood up and lobbed another grenade into the bedroom. It exploded almost immediately, with a deafening crash. On the ground floor, the asphyxiating fumes from the phosphoric compounds had started to thicken.

“Night has fallen,” I said. “Soon the fire will catch. It’s time you got moving, it’s time you came out.”

I took a few steps forward.

Now I reached into my bag and pulled out a pistol, a Yarygin I always brought with me on risky missions. I’d oiled the mechanism before starting off, and I knew there were seventeen cartridges in the clip. I began pacing back and forth in front of the house, its windows now spewing a smoke of no great density, immediately beaten down by the rain, along with the stinging stench of the incendiaries. It was very dark. I paced back and forth, I crouched down and froze in a predator’s posture, a killer’s pose, then stood up again. Silent flames appeared on both floors at once, red and orange tongues, fairly slender. Holding my gun, I studied the main bedroom’s windows.

For a third of a minute, nothing happened. The flames on the ground floor spread and took hold. Then a figure briefly appeared at the opening. It emerged from the fire-streaked darkness, and after a moment's hesitation backed into the shadows again. I fired just as it was retreating. I practice regularly, and I'm not a bad shot. I was sure I'd hit it in the shoulder or neck. That's what I always aim for. Aim for the limbs or the torso and your bullets can easily miss their mark.

"Now I'm going to name you," I said. "You have to leave. You're inside an oneiric world where your presence is neither accepted nor acceptable. You have to go now. I'm going to name you, and then you won't be able to stay."

Brilliant red flames gushed from an opening on the ground floor, ringed with a glittering halo of gilded sparks. Inside, objects were falling and crashing, bottles were shattering, no doubt stored in cupboards I hadn't explored, in the kitchen or elsewhere. The form I'd fired at a moment before reappeared at the window. It was a woman, dressed in a nightgown. She rested her hands on the sill, on the fragments of glass, and leaned out into the darkness. The fire rumbled behind her. I spotted the wound I'd inflicted, near her neck. Not much blood was flowing, it was a scratch of no consequence.

"Nadiejda Schwahn!" I cried. "Little sister! You've no call to be here! You have to go!"

The woman was wild with fear. She opened her mouth to let out a cry or lament. I drew a bead on that mouth and fired. She jerked and slumped through the window, her arms hanging long and inert against the outer wall.

At the same moment, wreathed in smoke, materializing amid the billows that belched from the window next door, a second figure came forward. I recognized it at once. I waited a couple of seconds.

Now it had transformed itself into a perfect target.

"Sarayah Schwahn!" I cried. "Little sister! You can't hang around here! This is all a bad dream, nothing more! This isn't your place!"

I had her in my sights, but I paused. She was holding a little child

in her arms. She must have hurriedly wrapped it in a rectangle of felt, a remnant of rug, to shield it from the flames. The child's face was hidden; all I could see was one foot, tiny and fragile, protruding from the crumpled cloth. She came toward the window again, her burden in the foreground. She was terrified. Usually so pure and so lovely, her features seemed racked by spasms of madness. Reaching the windowsill, she brandished the child as if presenting it to the dark skies or the sea, now invisible in the rain and the night. That gesture hid her head and shoulders from view. Blindly, I fired two shots toward what I could see of her stomach. She staggered. Her arms dropped. I seized the opportunity to put a bullet in her forehead. She began falling backward, and I worried the child might disappear along with her, might roll off into the darkness behind the wall and elude me. As quick as I could, I fired on the dim mass she was holding in front of her. The rug opened up and the child slipped out. It bounced off an overhang and fell to the ground. I ran forward and finished it off with a bullet to the face.

"Anniya! Little Anniya!" I said over the tiny form. "You weren't supposed to be here. You were lost, little Anniya Schwahn. For you, the dream is over. You had no reason to stay."

I went back to my post under the big bedroom windows. Sarayah Schwahn had collapsed backward into the flames and now lay out of sight. Nadiejda Schwahn was slumped over in a flood of brown smoke, lit from inside by red gleams. Short flames were shooting out near her black hair. Her arms hung limp.

Nothing more was going to happen on this side of the house.

I hurried around to the front. On the porch, a man was struggling to help a burned or wounded woman through the doorway. She writhed and sobbed, unable to stand on her feet. I pulled the trigger too soon and wasted a bullet. Then I stopped in my tracks to take better aim. I hit the woman first, in the cheek and then under the jaw, then the man somewhere in the upper chest. They collapsed together. They were wearing underwear and unbuttoned shirts, as sleepers surprised in their beds by a fire often are. I leapt onto the stairs and finished the rescuer off.

Now I was on the porch, crouching down by the bodies. I could have stepped over them and gone in, but I didn't. A furnace-like roar came to me from the other side of the threshold. The heat and the smell were unbearable, but I'd seen worse in my training. I could have stepped inside to make sure everything was in order. In the end, I preferred to stand up and get away. I started back down the steps.

Once again I felt the rain's violence, its regular, lashing violence, its verticality. I turned back to stare at the two bodies sprawled in the doorway, one atop the other, as if intertwined.

"Avariam Schwahn!" I cried. "Alexandra Schwahn! You came here together and you came by mistake! You weren't supposed to be here, in this alien dream!"

The prayer flags were fluttering, lifted by the fierce wind from the blaze. They were too wet to catch fire, but those nearest the door seemed caught up in a blistering wave of heat, and no longer trying to decide between a watery and a fiery fate. Here and there the cloth was reddening and smoking, the cloth and its inscriptions, inscriptions I could have deciphered if need be, if I'd taken the trouble. Avariam Schwahn and Alexandra Schwahn lay one atop the other. They lay soaked in black blood. Ripped and torn by the bullets, they were horrible to see. Sparks began finding their way under their shirts.

I addressed them again:

"You came here together, now you're leaving together," I said. "There was no way you could stay."

I tried to look into the image now forming behind them, a vision in motion. The living room was aflame, now brilliantly lit by twisting red columns of fire, now flooded with coal-black clouds. I saw the floor, burning in patches as if irregularly doused with gasoline, I saw the table, apparently untouched, I saw overturned chairs, already illegible, and a few of the steps leading upstairs. The walls had lost all their ornaments.

Suddenly a figure burst out of the kitchen, where it must have been hiding. I reflexively squeezed the trigger and missed, or at

best caused a trivial wound. The figure was running, clearly blinded by the flames and the smoke, but it must have glimpsed a way out, beyond the hell it was now racing through: the doorway where Avariam Schwahn and Alexandra Schwahn were lying. It raced in that direction, obviously not by chance. It was making one last desperate attempt to flee. It held a butcher's knife clutched in one hand, ready to slice through whatever might stand in its way, and also, should it succeed in escaping the house, ready to do battle with the arsonist. That blade is meant to be planted in my stomach or throat, I thought. The figure now racing toward me was that of a young woman. She was dressed in black pajamas, but she'd found time in the kitchen to tie wet rags around her legs, arms, and face. I couldn't quite make out her features, but her cool-headedness, her wise precautions, her courage, and her readiness to take on the aggressor told me all I needed to know of her identity.

"Mariya Schwahn!" I cried.

I fired a second time.

I'd aimed at her right hip, hoping to slow her down and buy some time for a better shot. She paused for a moment. She'd come to a spot where the flames raged more wildly, and just then a rush of whirling black ashes erupted at her feet, completely concealing her from view.

I squeezed the trigger again.

Two bullets left, I thought.

"Mariya Schwahn!" I cried. "Mariya! Little sister!"

She was already emerging from the dark clouds, no longer running. She walked toward the door at what looked like a leisurely gait. I saw the mark left by my second shot. I'd hit her in the hip, and probably shattered one rim of her pelvis, but it wasn't a fatal wound. The other shots had missed. Only two bullets left in my clip, I thought. The next one would have to do it.

Mariya Schwahn stepped over the bodies of Alexandra Schwahn and Avariam Schwahn. She moved with a certain slowness. Her own rag-swathed body was smoking, the left sleeve of her pajama top had caught fire. Not wasting a second, she snuffed out the

burgeoning flames, doing exactly what had to be done. The dishrag enveloping her head fell onto Alexandra Schwahn's face. She was holding the knife like a short saber, the point slightly raised. She was skilled in martial arts, I knew that, and handy with a blade. Even wounded, she remained a threat. She stepped over the threshold, crossed the porch in two strides, and started down the stairs. Soon she was out in the rain. She took the steps one by one, clutching the banister to keep from losing her balance. She was staggering, looking wearily now at the Tibetan flags, which had protected no one, now at the patch of darkness where I stood. Her hair hadn't burned, but it was gray, uncombed, and dirty.

I let the rain douse her smoldering clothes. She was looking up at the sky and the soothing waters pouring down.

"Little sister!" I cried. "We've been cast into a bad dream! It's time we got out of this place!"

We stood for a moment face to face, three meters apart. I thought of the two bullets still waiting in my clip. I looked at Mariya Schwahn.

Mariya Schwahn started toward me.

She started forward with a grimace of pain.

Her knife had been assigned a trajectory that would end in my ribcage. The point was aimed at the underside of my ribs.

"Schwahn!" she suddenly shouted. "You have no cause to be here! Move now, get going! You've lost your way here, leave this place!"

I felt troubled. I still didn't fire.

Mariya Schwahn, I thought. I hear your voice. I can hardly understand your words, I don't understand the situation, but I hear your voice.

It's good that you're speaking to me now, I thought. It's good that it's you, Mariya, speaking to me now, and not someone else.

"Jean Schwahn!" she continued. "Hear your name! Jean Schwahn, little brother! No matter if you're unhappy or not, amid these horrible plants, in this driving rain, before this fire! This house you're now prowling around can no longer shelter you. No matter if you're



sleeping or not. I'm going to wake you and guide you toward sleeps where you belong. The place you now occupy was not meant for your presence. You've lost your way here. You have to leave. I'm going to show you the way out, I'm going to show you how to leave."

I stood still.

She came closer. If she'd wanted to, she could easily have slashed the wrist of my gun hand. She strode confidently into my line of fire, gently pushing my arm aside.

I put up no resistance. I'd never resisted Mariya Schwahn. She held herself against me, her head on my shoulder, her lips murmuring sentences into my ear.

"Jean Schwahn, little brother!" she murmured. "Listen to me. You're more sleeping than dead, more dead than a murderer. You're standing still in the rain, in front of this house and its odors of murder and blood, among the hideous plants. You're standing here by mistake. I'll help you extract yourself from this place, help you back to the places that suit you, the places you're used to. No one here is hostile to you. I'm going to show you the way back."

She thrust her knife under my floating ribs. I felt the blade burst the pleura and sink into my lung, just missing the heart. It burned. I jumped back clumsily to get away from it, and, as Mariya Schwahn pulled the knife to strike again, I pointed the gun at her and fired. My gestures were not so self-assured as a few minutes before, but I knew at once that the bullet had found its target. I'd aimed for the center of her skull.

Now Mariya Schwahn was sinking to the ground. The knife slipped from her hands, pierced a dark leaf, and stood upright, the handle pointing skyward, not far from the crook of her arm.

Before us, the house was ablaze, roaring and crackling. Now the porch was going up. The two bodies on the threshold were clad in a riot of flames. Now they were nude, they'd turned black, and sometimes their flesh let out a small sizzle. Not much remained of the shamanic banners. Some were still fluttering in spite of it all, and even rising into the sky, just a little, held back by phantom strings in the billowing smoke.

The rain spattered around us, on Mariya Schwahn and on me, on the leaves, on the ground I could no longer see, on the darkness. I'd stopped breathing, I was scarcely thinking. I didn't want to remember what had once bound me to Mariya Schwahn. I felt sobs rising up from my depths. They threatened to carry me away, who knows where.

There's one bullet left, I remembered. That will be enough.

I knelt down next to Mariya Schwahn's body.

"Listen to me, now," I said. "Listen to your name."

I didn't look at Mariya Schwahn's shattered head. I looked at her bloodstained gray hair, the base of her neck in the black pajama top, the burned skin of the fingers on her left hand.

"I'm going to name you," I said. "You must hear me, and then you must leave. You've lost your way here. You have to leave right away. I'm going to help you."

Around me, the rain and the fire were bellowing incomprehensible words.

"Jean Schwahn," I said. "Listen to me. You've heard your name. Little matter if it's your name or another's. Now you must leave. Little brother, Jean Schwahn! You have one bullet left. Use it. That will be enough. That will be enough for you to leave."